

Interview with Ralph E. Becker

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR RALPH E. BECKER

Interviewed by: Charles S. Kennedy

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Q: Mr. Ambassador, I wonder if you could give me some background on your public life prior to being named Ambassador to Honduras, in 1976?

BECKER: I have had a long career, first as a lawyer in Westchester County in New York State. And then in Washington. I came to Washington in the '46 campaign (the 80th Congress) as the National Chairman of the Young Republicans. I had a second term as Chairman of the NFYR and then opened a branch law office in 1946 but permanently in 1952. I was involved in the Eisenhower campaign. As National Chairman of the Young Republicans I traveled the country (150,000 miles and organized every State) and became very much involved in national and international affairs, though basically I was a trial lawyer with a law firm that went back to 1880, in Westchester County. My brother became a judge, friends and associates and others became judges in Westchester County. So my extracurricular activities have been many and varied. In addition to practicing law, I have been a civic and cultural leader as well as being a decorated World War II veteran. Also I was a Presidential appointee for 20 years as well as serving as Minority Counsel to the US Senate Committee on Election and Privileges 1951. It is spelled out in my attached biography. I am very fortunate in having a wonderful wife who has been a partner in my activities.

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One of the areas of interest — as a hobby originally began as a teenager — was a collector of presidential memorabilia — political Americana. Ultimately, I gave the Smithsonian 30,000 to 40,000 items of political memorabilia.

Q: Good heavens! These are button, banners...

BECKER: Everything. They go back to the first President of the Continental Congress John Hanson and the first President George Washington. There will be an exhibition in September of the Bicentennial of the Presidency, at which time there will be many of my objects used. "We the People" is an exhibit now with many of my objects. I was awarded the James Smithson Benefactor Medal by the Smithsonian for my contribution.

Q: Oh good.

BECKER: My wife and I have been invited to be taped at the Smithsonian for a TV program. I also gave a collection to the LBJ Library of 5,000 items from the time of George Washington.

Q: This is the President Lyndon B. Johnson Library?

BECKER: Yes, Lyndon Baines Johnson. I worked with Lady Bird in connection with her Beautification Program.

Q: So really you were a bipartisan in your interests and your working witpresidents at this time?

BECKER: In may areas, yes. I served under six Presidents from Eisenhower's time. He appointed me as the founding trustee and General Counsel of the National Cultural Center — later renamed the John F. Kennedy Center in 1964 — as a memorial to the late President Kennedy. I continued in the service of the Kennedy Center, which was a public service until my appointment as Ambassador to Honduras. I never realized it was going

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to get that demanding and extensive. It was a illustrious service and a great contribution. It was born in controversy. Out of the legislative womb came the Air & Space Museum, the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge and the National Cultural Center. I'm just finishing a book of 800 pages, as a tribute to Eisenhower — President Eisenhower for his contribution to American culture. I did a taping for the centennial of the birth of Senator Chavez last week including a monograph of his role in the cultural center.

Q: This was Senator Javits of . . .

BECKER: No, Senator Denis Chavez of New Mexico. I'll be doing another one on February 22 for the Board of Trade for its centennial. Also did a monograph of its role in cultural affairs, particularly the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Q: I'd like to concentrate, in this particular interview, on your involvement in international affairs. In your law practice, did you have anything much to do with that?

BECKER: Yes, I did. I have long experience in international affairs including as a representative of several foreign governments. First I would like to point out that I served in World War II in the European Theater and had a distinguished service as the Judge Advocate of the 30th Infantry Division. We suffered 30,000 casualties, twice the size of a division. They were originally the National Guard of Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

In connection with my international affairs, in addition to serving in several Bar Associations including American Bar. International Law, Federal Bar (served as chairman of International Law Committee) Inter-American Bar, participating in symposia, seminars and conferences, I represented foreign countries or their interests in multi matters. I was decorated by 20 countries in war and peace including the OAS Award for my contribution to culture of the Americas. Serving as counsel and trustee of the Kennedy Center, I was involved in many international legal and cultural affairs.

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With regard to specific countries, I became acquainted with the ambassador of Iran (Dr. Ali Amini) and others — Iranologists and great scholars — and became the first and only President of the Iran-America Society. This contact gave me knowledge of their history, culture, and socio-economic problems as well as interests in Iran and other middle Eastern countries.

Q: This was in the 1950's?

BECKER: That was later. It was during the Johnson administration. Matter of fact, President Johnson appointed me as his personal representative with the rank of Ambassador to the Independence Ceremonies of Swaziland in 1968. My wife and I went to Swaziland. En route and returning, we stopped to meet friends we knew in the in US now serving in Embassies.

Q: I wanted to ask you a little about that in a minute.

BECKER: That's all right. So you know that we traveled a great deal. With the situation going on with Afghanistan today, we were very fortunate to have made a trip through the Khyber Pass. A outstanding ambassador named Theodore Eliot was the ambassador to Afghanistan. Hope you will tape him. He was dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and is now the Director of the Asian Foundation in San Francisco.

Q: Is that Ted Eliot?

BECKER: Yes, Theodore Eliot, a distinguished foreign service officer. He was on the Iranian desk in the State Department at the time of my Iranian relationship. So I tried to create a friendship between Iran and the United States, which was blooming at that time under the Shah. We had many cultural exhibitions. Two main ones — one was 7,000 years of Iranian art, and the other was for the 2,500th anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire — Cyrus the Great. My wife and I traveled to the opening of these exhibitions and were invited guests to Persopolis — in that great tent city. Oh that

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glamorous occasion. Another example was when I represented Austria which was then under the Five Powers. A great US ambassador, Llewellyn Thompson, negotiated the termination of that agreement in London. Through the Ambassador of Austria named Karl Gruber and others in the Embassy I became acquainted with their country.

Now I want to get back to Iran a minute before I forget about it. My relationship started with Iran by meeting Ambassador Amini as I stated before. He was a member of a great dynasty — the Qajars. He later became Prime Minister to put through the agrarian reform. But he didn't speak English very well. A very well-educated, brilliant man (educated at the Sorbonne). We'd walk through Rock Creek Park and I'd help him with his English. That became a friendship that still last today. It's unfortunate that Ayatollah Khomeini now has taken over and it is still questionable about the withdrawal of the Shah at that time. At any rate, we had built up a strong national Iran-America organization and had many activities. We honored the Shah on his visit here at the Textile Museum in Washington. He stayed for quite a while and greeted 500 people. So we had very good relations with both the Shah and the Empress of Iran. There was an exhibit in Canada and the Empress invited my wife and me and we went up there and spent time there. We had three or four audiences with the Empress. I was decorated three times. I would like to get back to Austria. As I mentioned, there was an ambassador named Gruber — Karl Gruber.

Q: He was the Austrian ambassador?

BECKER: Yes. Previously he was the first foreign minister of Austria. He had been fighting with the Underground against the Nazis. He is a very earthy person and practical. He came from a place called Tyrol in Austria. I met him in Washington.

Q: In the Austrian Alps.

BECKER: Yes. I see him regularly, I hear from him continuously. In the fifties they didn't have anything. They were strapped economic-wise. I helped them with the Marshall Plan and professional advice in many areas such as Elin Company of Graz, a manufacturer

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of transformers involved with the Buy America Act and won it. I was paid for this work. I was awarded one of the highest medals of Austria. There were other countries I became acquainted with such as Italy, Sweden, Belgium, France, Japan, Denmark and Norway. They're important because of my relationship. I obtained very valuable gifts for the Kennedy Center. Such as the chandeliers in the Grand Foyer came from Sweden, made by Orrefors. For the Concert Hall, I obtained the chandeliers from Hadelands, Norway. As a matter of fact, the architect never believed they made glass chandeliers in Norway, but they had made them long before Sweden did. Through Ambassador Gruber I obtained chandeliers for the Kennedy Center, including the gem in the Opera House. From Belgium I obtained the 60-foot mirrors in the Grand Foyer. After a commitment to President Kennedy by President Segni of Italy of marble, because of the change of governments, we had to lobby with the Italian Parliament to execute the commitment.

Q: Well now, let me ask — your relationship with say Sweden. I'm not speaking about your relationship in particular, but talking about a Washington lawyer having a professional relationship with a country. Every country has lawyers. What sort of work would you do? Using you as an example, say for Sweden?

BECKER: I did no professional work for Sweden. But had a good rapport with the Ambassador Count De Besche. He was interested in knowing and inviting proper VIPs from the administration, Congress and the community to various functions. Also the political situation.

Q: Well, let's take another country.

BECKER: I referred to Austria which I helped over a score of years. They had a very small office, economic and commercial, in the Dupont Circle Building where we had our law office. It was through their offices that I met Ambassador Gruber. They needed help. They knew nothing about the way the federal government and its administrative agencies operate. They wanted the Marshall Plan, but needed advice. They had an anti-dumping

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problem in treasury with textiles. It was a know-how, who's who, and how to handle themselves with our federal agencies. Because there were areas that would go outside of the State Department in dealing with the administrative agencies. For that we would deal directly. Also I helped them in other areas such as meeting members of the Congress and Senate, invitations to functions. This goes for similar advice to other diplomats from other countries, too. When cultural productions and exhibitions came here, I helped utilize the invitations for good will.

I remember we had a luncheon in honor of three governors of Austria and Senator Aiken from Vermont was host. Of course the famous Trapp family had come from Austria and the Senator and the people were very proud of them.

Q: Yes, there are the singers.

BECKER: Yes, they were in the Sound of Music with Julie Andrews. So he had a luncheon for them, which I paid for, and the three governors came to the luncheon. They were the giants of modern Austria. It was a matter of good will with the Congress. Another area involved, Czechoslovakia, I represented them professionally, had to do with flat glass. They were charged with anti-dumping. I visited Czechoslovakia to prepare the cases and visited various cities including Mariansbad where our division was stationed when we were withdrawn from Germany after the War.

Q: These are tariff items?

BECKER: Yes. Let's take other countries. Denmark, a small wonderful country. I professionally handled a claim over construction of the Embassy and also advised in bringing food products and cheese. Had a strong relationship with Ambassador Knuth Winterfeldt. Helped in many areas. Norway would be of interest to you. One of our closest friends was a man named Captain Finn Ronne, one of the world's great explorers of the Arctic and Antarctic. My wife and I went to the Arctic Circle with him and brought back polar bears for the Washington Zoo. I went down to the Antarctic as part of "Operation

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Deep Freeze” where Captain Ronne named a mountain after me, but I couldn't find it — named Mount Becker.

In Latin America, I helped Brazil — not professionally. The ambassador Amaral do Piexoto, married into the distinguished Vargas family who were very well known. Where I helped them out was in the northeast part of Brazil. I did some studies for nothing — just as a public service — on the question of water, roads, and various other economic areas. Later they came to use them. I was decorated by Brazil twice.

In Norway the ambassador was formerly a newspaper man. His name was Hans Engen. He died prematurely, just before we were going salmon fishing in Norway. The beginning of diplomatic relationships with many countries was when I was chairman of the Cultural Development Committee of the Board of Trade in the fifties.

Q: Is this the Washington Board of Trade?

BECKER: Yes. I extended the activities of the Board of Trade as Chairman of the Cultural Development Committee, and broadened the base of the committee. I had about a hundred on the committee. I would honor people like Thornton Wilder, Old Vic of London, Richard Coe the dramatic critic, another drama critic Jay Carmody, Dr. Mann, Director of the Zoo, I started the Inter-American Music Festival, which is on-going today; Captain Finn Ronne, Father Gilbert Hartke and others. Would have 600 to 700 people at a luncheon.

Q: Of Notre Dame?

BECKER: No, Catholic University. A famous priest, involved in the arts and cultural affairs. And the Vienna Philharmonic. Also I had a program called Health USA. Senator Lister Hill of Alabama was our first luncheon honoree — he was the father of the National Institutes of Health. We had five successive luncheon tributes to the medical and scientific world.

Q: NIH

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BECKER: Yes, Mary Lasker, a great woman, was a fellow trustee of the Kennedy Center involved in health, cancer, and art was one of many honored guests. At any rate, I set up for the first time, a meeting with the cultural attach#s and counselors of through Karl Cristopherson Cultural Counselor of the Danish Embassy and Dean of the Cultural Counselors. We had about 70 countries represented at a reception.

Well, continuing on, in Denmark I did professionally represent them in many matters including the Federal Trade Commission Food and Drug Administration and other administration agencies. They brought over a food truck and they were going to bring it to the gourmet shops. I told the ambassador, "You better go to the Giant supermarket, or Safeway, where there's a greater exposure." They took my advice — this was the beginning of a successful food venture. Anyway, I obtained a substantial gift from Denmark for the Kennedy Center.

I became acquainted with the Belgium ambassador because our division — also other reasons for it — liberated Belgium.

Q: This is the third division?

BECKER: No, the 30th, called the Old Hickory Division. Our relations cemented beautifully because later on I obtained a very major gift from Belgium for the Kennedy Center — sixty foot mirrors for the Grand Foyer.

And the Netherlands was a very interesting relationship that continued to the present time. Going back to Denmark, they had construction problems with the new residence. The roof leaked and other problems. There was a question of payment a counterclaim and a question of redoing the building or repairing it. They decorated me with the Order of Dannebrog, one of the highest orders of their government. That's just to give you some ...

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Q: So did you not move into your foreign service assignment without considerable background in dealing with other countries.

BECKER: Yes, that is right. It turned out to pay dividends too as you will see — not materialistically. I didn't know what to expect as an ambassador. The appointment was a surprise to me. But my varied service in and for many foreign countries from the fifties stood me in good stead as well as my relationship with the Congress was very good. I served on the Hill. I was a minority counsel — Republican counsel in the famous Tydings-Butler case. If you remember the case in 1950-1951 was a cause celebre and was in the McCarthy era. The Times Herald was run by Basey McCormick Miller, the favorite niece of Colonel McCormick in Chicago. Tydings accused McCarthy and Basey McCormick Miller of conspiring to defeat him and charged among other things criminal libel.

Q: Was this a famous picture?

BECKER: Yes, the Browder Tydings composite picture. Your memory is very good Stuart. Right. The investigation was continued without counsel on the Republican side. They woke up one day and they found that the Senate may not seat Butler but the Republican minority wanted to have counsel. When I first asked I had to turn it down because of other commitments. I was in trial, and they wanted a Republican who was a trial lawyer. I finally accepted that position — a very difficult and tough one against the Times Herald its officers and others. Tydings kept peppering the Justice Department to proceed with an indictment. Butler won that race and there were several reasons why he won. Basically, Tydings claimed he was defeated by McCarthy tactics. He brought charges, among many others, of criminal libel against the Times Herald, its management, Senator Butler, his campaign agent McCarthy and others. I had to investigate and prepare the case including cross examination of Senator Tydings for the Republican senators. When I finally accepted the position, I said I would only do it on two grounds. One was that the rules and

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guidelines be changed so that the attorney can cross-examine a witness. That became the guideline for any future hearings of that kind. I cross-examined other witnesses.

Q: I'd like to move on. Had you any experience with Central America prior to your appointment?

BECKER: I served as the counsel and delegate from the Dominican Republic to the World Sugar Conference in Geneva in 1958 and served on the legal drafting committee. I was also involved in many other areas particularly cultural affairs. Not specifically in Central America, but all of Latin America. I was on the entourage with President Eisenhower in 1960 to Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. I was not in Brazil at that time, but on other occasions I was in Uruguay as well as Argentina. I had many friends in Argentina.

Q: This was on his trip.

BECKER: Yes. But before that time, the time when Sputnik went up, we had the Inter-American Bar Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I made three speeches there which received international coverage. It also appeared in the Congressional Record and elsewhere. The topic of speech, as I recall, was The Impact of the Atom and the Satellite on the Law and the Lawyer. I did write after I learned of Sputnik going up when we were in Lima. When I arrived in Buenos Aires I tore up that one speech, and that was the one that became very famous by virtue of the title, and contents. I'm not going to get involved in details now, but these gave me relationships with friends, the press, and others. By virtue of my experience, it gave me a good background in dealing with the press and with the legislature, executives, and different governments. I also spoke Spanish.

Q: Where did you learn Spanish?

BECKER: First in high school, then by virtue of the trips I was taking, I would pick up more Spanish — not fluent but enough to help out. We traveled a great deal, including Lima, Peru. Also went to Machu Picchu. We have a collection of Truman Bailey's art, one of the

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great American artists — who went to Lima in 1929. He married into an old line family that goes back to days of Pizarro. They were the conquistadores.

By virtue of my relationship with Austria, it was very important, I was able to obtain the beautiful chandeliers in the opera house of The Kennedy Center. The story is worthwhile because what happened was, that when Austria previously gave the chandeliers to Lincoln Center it became a cause celebre. Lobmeyer, where their hand-blown crystal is famous for their chandeliers — known throughout the world. Another company felt that Lobmeyer received the contract and the gift without competition. So the Parliament passed a law that no more chandeliers be given to anybody. I had to overcome that obstacle. But because of the friendship with Gruber, who was then the chancellor — or with the chancellor's office at that time — we were able to work out a three-way deal, whereby we were able to get a appropriation from Parliament to obtain gifts from two other chandelier manufacturers, which are in the Kennedy Center, also the Lobmeyer ones in the Opera House. The ceiling treatment is considered an artistic gem.

Q: Let's move on to your being assigned to Honduras. How did this come about?

BECKER: It was a surprise.

Q: We're talking about 1976?

BECKER: Yes. I was serving as the general counsel and Founding trustee of the Kennedy Center. I had a call one day from the White House, whether I'd like to be an ambassador. I never thought anything about it. I talked to my wife — or maybe I said it right off the bat — I'd be very honored to be an ambassador. I didn't know what country or anything else. I was just asked, point blank, that one question.

Q: This was under President Ford?

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BECKER: Yes. Gerry Ford was an old friend of mine. He knew my work and long time public service. There's a letter here accepting my resignation as trustee of the Kennedy Center — praiseworthy letter and so forth, and how I continued my public service as an ambassador. At any rate, his appointment was one that met with favor on the Hill. It was a great experience in that my name came up and they held no hearing. It was approved by the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Senate without any objection. There are those who told me that they don't know of an instance where there was not a hearing, at least, of a political candidate. That's because I have a good relationship with the Hill in various matters.

Q: Had you been told that it would be Honduras, or was there any sort of choice?

BECKER: No. The first time I was not told where, when ...

Q: Just would you like to be an ambassador?

BECKER: Right, that was the question.

Q: Why was Honduras selected, do you think?

BECKER: I don't have any reason for it. It's just like when President Johnson called me in New York, and asked me — I was in the Plaza Hotel — he wanted to know if I would like to represent him at the Independence Ceremonies in Swaziland? I didn't even know where Swaziland was.

Q: This is in 1968?

BECKER: Right. The answer to your question is that my predecessor in Honduras was a non-Foreign Service Officer named...

Q: Philip Sanchez.

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BECKER: Yes. As a matter of fact, Phil did a very good job. Honduras had a terrible tornado and a storm that cost 10,000 lives, and millions of dollars in damages, particularly to the banana crops. But, when I arrived — I'm ahead of my story here, but — when I arrived there were compliments as well as criticism of Phil Sanchez, notwithstanding the great work he did during that storm. He went to Columbia and apparently he said some things, or when he dressed in a white suit when he shouldn't have and had to be withdrawn. But normally — I don't have any basis why Honduras was selected at that particular time. I did find out that someone was needed to develop good will between the government of Honduras and the United States for a lot of reasons.

Q: Coming to those reasons, before you went out to Honduras, did you have any sort of training in how to be an ambassador? And were there any instructions of what to do? But let's talk about the training.

BECKER: no, I had no training whatsoever. I had briefings and met with state Department officials. Told about Embassy, staff, read briefs and material about Honduras briefs, and met with someone about the residence. I do want to say one thing, that Chief Justice of the Supreme Court — a friend of mine...

Q: Warren Burger.

BECKER: Yes, he told me that he'd be very happy to swear me in and he was traveling to Sweden. I cabled him, he flew over especially, to the United States and he came to the ...

Q: That's quite an honor.

BECKER: State Department and swore me in. They tell me that's unprecedented. Normally the Chief of Protocol does it.

Q: Normally, yes.

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BECKER: Also, I became friendly with Philip Habib who represented State at the ceremony, one of our distinguished, experienced public servants as far as I'm concerned, and still is. We became very good friends as a result of it.

I would say in answer to one question — throughout this whole interrogation, this history — in being a civic, cultural leader, lawyer, active in the Republican party as a leader, my extensive administration experiences, and my relationships with governments — particularly the United States government — the Congress, the executive branch served me very well. Also my experience as a trial lawyer, and knowing something about human nature and human conduct, and blessed with a wonderful wife were extremely helpful in carrying out my duties. I think that's a very, very important part of the service as I look back. You couldn't perform as an ambassador without an able, supportive wife who would also perform many activities and share as a partner. Very, very important.

I can't have the answer to your question as to why Honduras. But as to specific training for the position, I would say that as it turned out, as my service as ambassador, and the way that I was treated by the Hondurans, and my relationship with them, left a good image of the United States government... For example, only two days after I arrived, I was out in the field already, with a plane on a mission in connection with the AID program. My object of work — right from the beginning — was to meet with the people, meet the campesinos — which are the peasants representing 80 to 90 percent of the people — and develop a good relationship with them. I was not going to get involved with the agrarian reform. I had problems because — not so much with the Standard Fruit, but the United Brands — they had problems before I arrived.

Q: It came out in the newspapers while you were there, I believe.

BECKER: No, that was before. I inherited that legacy.

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Q: We might come to that later...Before this, you came out with no training except, "You're an ambassador. Here's your certificate. Off you go," more or less. Did you have any instructions from the Honduran desk of what we were after, what our interests were?

BECKER: I remember — not that so much — I remember, in the State Department. I had to get clearance from the State Department. I remember there was an outstanding woman ambassador. She married an ambassador. I can't think of her name for the moment.

Q: Carol Laise now the widow of our illustrious Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker.

BECKER: Yes Carol. She said, "Why do you want to be an ambassador?"

I said, "Because the President asked me."

She said, "Well, do you know what you're up against and so forth?"

I said, "No. I don't." But I was confident that I could handle the assignment with my experience. Oh, I know I did one thing. Before I did go down to Honduras, I can recall taking some Spanish lessons right away, and as soon as I was alerted, I took up Spanish again.

Q: Ambassador Carol Laise, for the record, was Director of the Foreign Service. She had been Ambassador to Nepal.

BECKER: Yes, a wonderful person. Very firm with me. It was a good question.

There were briefings. I can't tell you how extensive they were. I don't recall, but I did go to the State Department on various occasions, and meet with several individuals, not one. Like the AID and the Peace Corps officials.

Q: USIA?

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BECKER: Yes. Also, I dealt with Personnel, as to who I should have as a secretary, and about the number two man, and so forth. And I did want to have a good secretary. I'll tell you about that separately. They told me the extensiveness of the embassy, and the setup, the table of organization and the personnel. They didn't know too much about the conditions of the embassy. They did tell me that we will meet a certain officer in the embassy, and about the fact that they had the residence refurnished recently, because of the storm. But Ann will tell you about that because it was a dark, dismal place. When we arrived and saw it she changed all that radically.

But there were some briefings, Stew about the nature of the country. Then I read up on the country. They may have given me some briefing papers on Honduras. I remember one area, and that was the relationship between El Salvador and Honduras. There was a "soccer" war in 1969, a boundary dispute which led to an adversary situation. The border was closed. And there was an ambassador from El Salvador who was a newspaper man. We could not exchange visits. My communication was through the Military Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Fesseden a very able officer. That was one problem that I was advised about. And then I did whatever reading was necessary. Found out more history and the status when I was in Honduras with attempts to resolve peacefully this dispute.

Just to add to your question, I remember calling up a wonderful ambassador named John Jova, who was in Mexico, who served with distinction in Honduras. I needed some advice. I called him for his counsel. we went to Mexico City during our tenure to visit Jovas'. I also met some of my old Mexican friends in Mexico at the dinner that he and Mrs. Jova gave. One was a former ambassador of Mexico to the United States. He was a Lincoln scholar.

Q: What sort of advice did you need?

BECKER: I can't recall now, but we had problems with the military. I didn't have a problem, I had a genuine and cordial relationship wit the infantry, air force, and there was a navy started while I was there.

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Q: We're talking about the Honduran military?

BECKER: Oh yes, sure. I can't remember what I saw John about, but we developed a excellent friendship. I know he was very helpful to me. I'll go on with some other things, but basically I consider him to be one of the giants in the foreign service. He served, I think, in Spain too.

Q: Yes, he has had a major career in the Foreign Services.

BECKER: He's done an outstanding superb job as a director of the Meridian House in Washington. But going back to the question you asked, preparation to — briefings and so forth. It had to be limited because my confirmation and swearing in was shortly — oh, within 30 days we had departed.

Q: What was, from your perspective, when you arrived in Honduras what was the political situation in Honduras at that time? [Tape interrupted]

BECKER: I think that I had some background on Honduras. In order to give you a broader idea about the country and its people, in light of the question that you asked. But I will answer that question. I found there was freedom speech — freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, respect for human rights with one exception to my knowledge — notwithstanding a military government. At the time that I served as ambassador — as I look back, it's kind of a little transition because ... The military had control of the government before that time. They had relieved General Lopez Arellano over bribery accusations — United Fruit was involved — and economic problems it cost him his government. He was succeeded by another person under whom I had a close and warm relationship, named General Melgar.

Q: This is Juan Alberto Melgar?

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BECKER: Yes. And his wife was a professor. He and I established a wonderful friendship, an excellent working relationship.

Q: He was a general, a military man?

BECKER: Yes, he was. He was elected by the Consejo Superior de las Fuerzas Armadas that's the Council of Armed Forces. A body of 20 to 25 key commanders of the Armed Forces. They relieved Lopez as Chief of the Armed Force because of charges of bribery by United Fruit, and other charges that Lopez took over the government in 1963. By the way, this Council is still in existence. There was a change of government in 1982. I think we should tie that in because it's very important. There were insinuations that the influence of Lopez even continued. There were others involved with him but I only recall the bottom line. It ran in excess of \$1 million. I've heard of other allegations, bribes. The mine, for example. I can't vouch for the facts, but what they tell you is they would paint the gold blocks silver and export them in as gold. That mine very recently — which goes back to the Spaniards was recently bought by some American investors. I was told that by a representative of our own country. Mrs. Mae Sue Talley, who is head of the Caribbean Affairs or Caribbean Institute — a government position — she told me about it. Her job is privatization of government companies and she helped them in Honduras and Guatemala.

But regarding Honduras, let me give you a picture from 1976.

Q: I'd like your perspective of how you saw the situation when you went out there, at that time.

BECKER: First of all, the Republic of Honduras is the geographical heart of Central America. It's very important to emphasize it, in light of all the problems we have now. as I tried to show you on the map how it's surrounded by other countries that are in trouble or visa versa. Honduras borders Guatemala. El Salvador, Nicaragua, with coastlines on both the Pacific and the Caribbean. As I recall, we have a 325 mile coastline on the Atlantic,

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and about 75 miles on the Pacific. I could show you that on the map. But for that purpose, it gives you an idea. The Pacific coastline consists of 90 miles — the Gulf of Fonseca. So, what you're dealing with here is that — the Caribbean side is 400 miles. So the country's 3 1/3 million citizens live in 43,277 square miles, mountain and tropical paradise, roughly the size of Pennsylvania. About 90 percent of the Honduran population is mestizo a mixture of Spanish, Indian and black. There are small minorities of Caucasians, middle eastern and Blacks.

Q: By the way, you are reading from a document which you'd prepared in July of 1977.

BECKER: That is right, that is correct. It was printed in the Congressional Record. What happened was, I did this — and it's very helpful right now. When you called about the oral history of Honduras, it was hard to remember many of these things I did. But anyway... Before we went to the capitol of Honduras, I never knew where Tegucigalpa was. The name was completely foreign to me. It traces its heritage to 1578, when the Spaniards founded a gold and silver mining settlement. That same gold mine that I talked to you about a second ago, on and off has been in existence.

Tegucigalpa has an elevation of 3,500 feet above sea level, and our residence was high away overlooking the city of Tegucigalpa. Ann will tell you more of what she did in converting the embassy residence. The fast developing area in San Pedro Sula is the industrial and commercial center of the booming North Coast area. Now, you have to understand...

Q: Well, this is on tape. Mr. Ambassador, I think maybe we might save some of these for the researcher, they can sort of do their own — you know — how things are. But how did you view our interests in Honduras at the time?

BECKER: I'll explain that too. You asked me about the political situation. Okay, sure, be glad to. What I want to explain to you is, and appreciate your indulgence, is that to understand — of course, whether the researcher does or not — to understand the territory,

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the people, the problems, economic, social, and otherwise, is what I was faced with and what I did during that time. So when you realize that 90 percent of the children under five years of age suffer from malnutrition — and there hasn't been much change since that time — and 40 percent of the population suffers from malnutrition. Illiteracy is another major problem. Two-thirds of the adults and a tremendous percentage of children don't enroll in schools and less than half never make the second grade. The per capita income, at that time was \$40 or less. It's a little bit higher now. But you must realize that the Campesinos — which is the peasants —

Q: So it was a very, very poor country.

BECKER: Very poor, and it still is, particularly when you realize ... I just wanted to flash back... At this time it's compounded, not only by our own military being there, but there are 100,000 refugees. First they poured in from El Salvador, and now from Nicaragua.

Q: El Salvador, from the Soccer War 1969 and in Nicaragua, from the civil war that's going on there.

BECKER: That's correct! I'm in communication with people in Honduras now, friends of mine, particularly one — Jacob Goldstein, who was a great reporter and narrator, probably the best there is in Latin America, equivalent to our best in the United States. He's now living here in the United States. He was with the embassy of Honduras and now he's on his own, representing the press of T.V. and radio. Jacob helped me out tremendously in advice, and counsel. He and his family are very good friends. I'll tell you more about personnel, where they helped me out with knowledge I didn't have before arriving in Honduras. I had to absorb it right away.

It's not only poor, but it's so limited because the country's economy is mainly agricultural. They have cattle there for export. Now there are industrial and commercial activities on North Coast.

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One story you're not going to find in any research: The Mafia. In the North Coast there is "the mafia". Not what you think like in this country. They are business syndicates, okay, Israelis and Palestinians, Lebanese, Arabs. Briefly, they are very successful and happy — 100% Hondurans. There are also intermarriages. Ann and I attended a wedding of Jaimem Rosenblum. She was a beautiful dark Palestinian. He later became a power in the government. In the North Coast, which for many years the Puerto Cortes, Tela and La Ceiba were the ports used by the Banana companies. Puerto Cortes is the shipping and commercial center managed by a government authority. It is the largest container port in Central America. That was changed in Agrarian Reform, and this is where unfortunately my predecessor got involved — Agrarian reform — a local problem. Officials criticized him, and the press as well when I arrived in Honduras — October 29th — in an editorial "the mission of a diplomat" pointed out that I was not a substitute for Philip Sanchez. The basic criticisms made, as I recall affected the foreign policy of the United States. What they did — they kind of alerted me that Latin America is not requesting charity. It only wants independence with economic and trade exports, etc. The editor said this is a real mission, to understand the reasons that bring countries and governments together, or apart, and to find social justice through international economic justice. The editor went on and gave me quite a notice in the editorial of my duties as a diplomat.

Q: I see. So Ambassador Sanchez had been requested to leave because he had been critical...

BECKER: No, no. He did a good job. He was transferred on the merits. He was given another assignment to Columbia. It was in Columbia that he got himself involved.

Q: Oh, I see.

BECKER: No, he did an excellent job. Of course, they had that incredible tragedy and devastation of the hurricane. Fifi, 1974. He and his wife worked hard — they used the

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residence to help people, orphans and families. He went in literally with his boots on. It was in Columbia ...

Q: I see.

BECKER: You were asking about 1976. On the North Coast there's another port called Puerto Castilia on the Bay of Trujillo. Today it's a tremendous air and naval base for the United States and Honduras. It's three times larger than the Puerto Cortez. When we were there, there were slaughter houses which polluted the water and full of sharks. But they were beginning to change, I'll show you some of the contributions I made in connection with some of those problems. Social, economic including illiteracy problems.

Basically, you're dealing with a rural country. Where US AID is critical, our AID director Frank Kimball, was terrific.

Q: He was the head of AID?

BECKER: AID, yes. I met with him immediately, the day I arrived actually — and two days later I was out in a field (I'll get to that in a second). It was the decision made by the government of Honduras with AID assistance to take a broad, national initiative to confront malnutrition which cannot be over emphasized. A national planning and coordinating body was established. A plan together with and supported by the wife of the Chief of State who I brought into this project. This project to support nutrition by the United States was enthusiastically received.

So on November 2, 1976 — you must understand this was only weeks after I arrived...

Q: Yes, I understand, you'd just ...

BECKER: Also, I signed, with the Minister of Finance, a far reaching nutrition loan of \$3.5 million, which along with complimentary grant assistance of \$750,000 provided funds to support Honduran programs, including nutrition education, rural potable water, supply and

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sanitation, a form of wells and latrines, pilot activities to introduce new and more nutritious foods, and a nutrition-status vigilance system to identify and monitor malnutrition by areas and groups, and national nutrition planning. If implemented, it will serve 300,000 people.

Let me explain something. In one of the communities where potable water is so necessary, in dire need, there's another level above the Campesinos called Patronadas. They're like a parent-teacher association. They will do the work and you give them the money. As an example, they'd have to go for miles, or kilometers to get water. They would tap a spring, under the direction of Don Bridwell who I should mention more about.

Don is a big six footer. He came to me with 20 years experience in Honduras, starting with Brown-Root, a large construction company and then from there he was under contract to AID. They call him "Big Don." A wonderful representative of the United States. The Campesinos and Patronadas loved him. We became fast friends and was of tremendous help to me. He lives in Grand Junction, Colorado.

As I was saying they would tap a spring from the mountainside and with water through a one-inch pipeline, they built a holding tank with three walls around, with stones, and bring the water down to this holding tank. Then they would bring a one-inch pipeline under the road to the communes. That's how this particular community got its water. This saved them miles.

Q: How did you find the staffing of the embassy when you got there?

BECKER: Well, you see, you're digressing still, but that's okay.

Q: Okay, we'll move back to the political situation.

BECKER: Also, back to the economic situation. Banana Industry social, so forth. I want to go back to that. So if you'd just make a notation I'd appreciate it.

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Can I go back, just for a minute?

Q: *Sure.*

BECKER: Fifi was in 1974.

Q: *This is the hurricane?*

BECKER: Hurricane, yes. It struck northern Honduras, leaving in its wake widespread devastation and human suffering. Now, national agricultural development programs were particularly hard hit. On November 2, 1976, I signed, with the Minister of Finance Porferio Zavales, a \$9.5 million Rural reconstruction (#II) Loan Agreement to continue support and recovery from the effects of the hurricane and enable the government to attain momentum of its development programs.

The loan contained three elements: two were focused on the needs of the agriculture and especially farmer groups. \$5,000,000 in loans funds were directed to credit for small farmer groups who were severely affected by the hurricane. Just imagine this is a small amount of money. In order to provide access to credit — other services and markets — \$2.5 million loan funds were provided to put in access roads, and to enable a year round vehicular access up to 125 small farm communities — especially those in the hurricane zone area.

The third element was \$2,000,000 of a loan, which I signed as ambassador, to support Rural Primary Education, which was really very, very critical. Especially the government program of Central/Satellite Schools. I was there when they inaugurated the first school, which stresses greater relevancy and thus improved learning for rural children and Teachers Training. This was one major measure to attack — illiteracy.

Now, I want to tell you — Ann talked about it — she was involved in education and child welfare, too. That's why I say a wife is very important.

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Q: Oh yes, I understand this.

BECKER: Just a further indication, for the record, of my commitment to education improvement was the symbolic inauguration of schools constructed under the project supported by the first reconstruction loan. I was the guest of honor at the formal inauguration ceremonies in El Carrizal on May 10, 1977. Though I worked with them from May, it lasted until November.

Now. I'll continue on with some of the important things that I did to help the Campesinos improve the quality of lives — let's put it that way. Two days after my arrival, I presented a check of \$2,500 to the Mayor of the town of Ojojana, to be used for the construction of an all-weather foot trail from Ojojana to San Jose, Dijacaro, and Santa Cruz. This trail enabled the people to increase the amount of food and cottage industry goods they could market, to increase commerce in general, and to increase their access to schools, health care, and other public services.

Let me tell you about the trail blazers — that's what it was called. I'll show you pictures too. I rode the donkey on the trail, but Ann road the horse with Don Bridwell, Ernesto Uribe (USIA) and others. It was an old Spanish trail, but it was critical for people to use, especially the Campesinos and Patronadas. And so this was rebuilt during my time. I inaugurated it and helped them, and it became very important. It was a big celebration because for hundreds of years they didn't have such a trail. The trail restorations increased in a number of other areas.

I told you about Frank Kimball. Frank Kimball today heads up the largest AID operation in the world. It's in Cairo. The man who followed him, John Robertson, another very capable officer — different type of person. But I always want to indicate as I go along that I became friends with these individuals who still are my friends today.

Q: Well, that's commendable.

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BECKER: But John Robertson served after that — he was just brought down to Costa Rica on a contract with AID to do a privatization of the government owned industries or businesses. He'll finish it in a couple of months. Confident he will do a super job. We have been in communication with him. Also we are in communication with Don Bridwell.

Q: Again, concentrating on the time in Honduras, besides the AID functions, how did you find the staffing of the embassy? Considering your Deputy Chief of Mission, your political, your economic officers, how much support or lack of support, expertise did they supply?

BECKER: I still want to answer your question, but there's some unanswered questions I want to get back to. We'll do that in a second.

Q: Okay.

BECKER: First of all, I should tell you that the Peace Corps did one of the most wonderful jobs in the world, as far as I am concerned. Frank Almaguer was the head of the Peace Corps at that time. I would develop a close relationship with them. Frank was always in attendance at staff meetings, but met with him and the Peace Corp regularly. There are 200 from the ages of 21-70. Honduras even asked for more members of the Peace Corps. That's how much they liked them. They developed goodwill, did all kinds of things. I remember an elderly couple doing skilled work. I would look into their activities. Honduras has the largest pine forests in Latin America — besides mahogany and other woods within Forestry, a very big project. These forests are under a semiautonomous Honduran corporation — Cohedifor — it grew from zero to \$50 million.

When I arrived, unfortunately, Carl Bartch the number two man — and I don't want to say anything against him — unfortunately had a drinking problem. I was faced with that problem and I wanted to ignore it because — not only because of compassion, I didn't want to get involved in filing any complaint which was recommended to me by other members of the embassy staff.

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The Inspector General came down from — and I think someone may have said something to him about Carl Bartch. Bartch has a good record; he's retired now. But they tell me the story that he went to Panama when his wife was ill. That's when they found out they could help him with his alcoholism. That was a blessing in disguise, because then I had to do his work. A secretary, to me, is always very important. All my life a secretary has been very critical to my works. I had the right to select my own secretary. So I was inquiring around and the name came up — someone in Nicaragua — she would love to be in Honduras. I said, “what's her record?”

“Well, you can talk to the ambassador, Theberge.”

So he told me about Virginia, and he said. “Very competent.”

Q: Her name is Virginia —?

BECKER: I have her name. I said to Ambassador Theberge, you know, qualifications, experience? “Oh, she's great.” He gave her a tremendous send off.

I said, “that's fine.” When she came I found out that she had some property in Honduras. She was finishing her tour of duty and was going to retire in Honduras. She was lazy and wasn't helpful at all. Had her own ways, her own habits, and it was very difficult. What happened was when I saw Ambassador Theberge on a visit to Nicaragua. I said, “How come you gave this gal such a complementary qualification, experience, so forth?”

He told me, bald-faced, he tried to get rid of her. I called him every name in the world. I don't mind telling you that episode because it turned out she just couldn't do the work and be loyal. If I didn't have the support of George Knight, the number three man — who ran our operations and management and so forth — I'd have been in tough shape.

Q: He was the administrative officer?

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BECKER: Yes he was. He was great. He's absolutely the best administrator I know. I wanted him to become an ambassador. We became close, intimate friends. He's in Bangkok now, finishing a tour of duty. He runs the biggest computerization staff in the world — I mean Southeast Asia. Everything in Southeast Asia, but basically the staff. He told me the number of people—runs in the thousand. But now with the budget cuts, he's so unhappy with it, because he can't carry out many of his duties. He had a heart attack on top of that. He has a home in Virginia and will be back here in a few months. But that's to give you an example in answer to your question about the embassy staff. Here we became friends, Ann and I, with the Knights. He's a minister counselor. For ten years we've been close friends. When they came here they would visit with us, as they did just a few months ago, or my brother-in-law, or friends visiting Thailand, and he would entertain them and so forth. But Colleen and George are close friends of ours. He was absolutely outstanding in his knowledge, ability to do things with little money.

Now, I'll continue about the staff. After a short while, I found out the problems I had administrative wise. With George Knight's help, I was able to get some secretarial support, clerical support. Also, I had the use of the AID small plane, which I used in my travels when necessary in Honduras. I had a military group, called the MilGroup. They come under the jurisdiction of our military in Panama.

Q: Yes, the southern command, Army Southern Command.

BECKER: That's right. And they are great officers there. I can't speak too highly of our military and our men. I'm in touch with, say, Bob Powell. He's in Virginia now. He was in Clemson University formerly a military school, where I've lectured at the Strom Thurmond Institute. It was just a funny thing that we crossed paths again at Clemson. I talked with him just two days ago. I wanted to bone up on a couple of questions you may ask me. Anyway, there was Crow, and Lieutenant Colonel Norrod. There was Major Basset. And I think we had about eight or ten officers in the military group. They came in originally to train the Hondurans. I remember one Colonel Rex Miller, was an absolutely fabulous

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fisherman. We had a famous Bass lake—Lake Yojoa. He was the only guy who could catch a fish. I went one day with him and he caught twenty-seven bass. I don't recall how many fish I caught. Nobody else could get this number. He's got some angle, I don't know what the hell it's all about, but anyway he's just the greatest fisherman I ever saw — besides, being a top officer.

Rex got a little upset one time because he was training the helicopter pilots, and he wanted to have a graduation ceremony — notwithstanding what the Hondurans wanted to do — delay it — a problem with a helicopter graduation. He trained them. I can give you the figures about what we had in helicopters — I think there were about four. He won out and we attended the graduation ceremony.

Then under Bob Powell two very interesting things happened. in the Puerto Cortez, they had a very big coral reef they wanted to break up for a number of years which hampered navigation. It was very important because they had the biggest container ship setup in Latin America at the Puerto Cortez. So what happened is, that they had to train frogmen; so they brought frogmen from Panama and Bob was in charge of that operation. He didn't know whether the Hondurans would be able to handle the elements under the water. They were never trained before. As they had no navy. When I was there they started the first navy. I inaugurated the first two patrol boats — or one patrol boat — something like that. They used it really for just around the ... they did have one boat up in Gulf Fonseca in the Pacific and they had one patrol boat in the Caribbean. Anyway, I went there for the explosion. Now, when I say explosion, they had to break this big 600 x 200 foot coral reef. Bob said the Hondurans were great. They did better than anticipated; they were strong and ... In other words, if the training didn't come out right, you'd have to use American frogmen from Panama. He didn't have to.

Let's take the navy, because that was just the beginning of the Honduran Navy which has now expanded quite a bit, because of “the situation.” But at that time we inaugurated the navy... By the way, the officers and sailors were not trained in the navy. They came from

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the army. And they were used as military men, as such. So you have to understand the organization was not like the Battalions in the Honduran air or infantry force. By the way, I went to a graduation of one of the battalions. I was invited — air force battalions. Very well trained — the air force is fabulous. That's what won the war with El Salvador. Hondurans are very proud of the battalions of their air force.

Ann and I went to graduation exercise. She and I went up with the officers in the plane, where they were jumping off. And they put jumpsuits on us for safety, not for jumping. I was not going to jump. I can tell you that now. This gives you an idea of the good relations and respect I had with the military across the board.

Well, let's go down the line of personnel. Then I had Colonel Fesseden whom I mentioned. He had a big plane — he and his assistant a captain, was a military intelligence officer. A very important post. For example, I could not go to El Salvador. I wanted to greet all my neighboring ambassadors with a mutual exchange. I did, except for El Salvador. Now, the ambassador of El Salvador was able to come across and visit me one time, later on in the spring. Colonel Fesseden would be permitted to fly into El Salvador and he regularly gave me information. He flew on many intelligence missions. He took me on missions outside Honduras.

Now he had his own line of intelligence to Washington. Remember, up until a certain point I was green — I'm learning all these particular things. The CIA director, Dario Guanari and his wife became very close friends of mine. She died about a year ago of cancer, down in Florida. He's retired. Very good man. Absolutely tops.

Q: Did CIA give you good support while you were there?

BECKER: Oh yes, I was briefed on his activities. What I can say publicly is one of concern certain labor unions were being infiltrated allegedly by the radicals or leftists — there were accusations of communism. His main area really was in the civil area whereas the military intelligence would be Colonel Fesseden's jurisdiction. It would be the unions, the

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Campesinos in the rural areas and other areas. He's a very likeable, pleasant person. He didn't show anything on his cuff that he was a member of any official force of any kind. He was able to get around the countryside, and they got to know him, and they liked him very much. They knew who he was — no secret, no problem.

Then I had a financial, economic, commercial officer, named Stahlman. But he wasn't doing his job very well. I've had discussions about that with other Ambassadors or Foreign Service Officers. There are some that are good and make it to the heights right away, and others just stay in their grade. He was not exactly loyal, supportive or effective as far as I'm concerned. One particular important incident I'll tell you about. Anyway, we had the beginning of narcotics traffic. That's where Melgar was very, very cooperative with me.

Q: This is the President of Honduras.

BECKER: Melgar was great. The personnel — we'll continue on — the household, Ann can give you that — wonderful help. One became a priest.

Then we had others, like the communications officers. One, I think was Sergeant. we had a very good staff on that score except two people. But, I want to go back to the military group. The head of navy came down to visit us, Admiral — or Captain — Best, from Mexico. So we had two commands. The military command came from Panama. The navy command came from Mexico City. Primary military jurisdiction — without question — was our command in Panama.

Q: It is predominately a military command for Latin America.

BECKER: Oh sure. General McAuliffe was chief of command — a top officer with diplomacy. We should take a great deal of pride in our military. Not because I served in the war, and was Judge Advocate of outstanding infantry division — the 30th Infantry Division, we had 30,000 casualties, and all kinds of records and awards. We had inspectors and had other officers from Panama. We would entertain them and established a good

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relationship between Honduran military and our own military. That was my mission. Another officer I must mention is the Consular Officer Hancock. His office was very busy with a lot of pressure for visas. I supported him. I did not interfere with his decision. He answered to Washington.

Q: This interview is centered more on the workings of the Foreign Service, and for the education of young Foreign Service Officers and others. you were saying that — there's no need to go into names — but you felt that you economic, commercial officer was not giving you full support. What was the problem?

BECKER: I think he had a personality problem, number one. Number two, for example information came to me from staff like George Knight who I trusted and others, to beware of him. Though I invited him and his wife to social functions at the residence, I was never comfortable with him. I have to go back and tell you about my organization.

What I did, when I found I had a problem, with the number two man, my secretary and so forth, I set up a “super-duper” committee. Like an executive committee. We had meetings of staff once a week. I set up this super-duper committee consisting of about four or five people: George Knight, Fesseden, Kimball, Uribe — I've got to tell you about him. Ernesto Uribe, absolutely the best officer I ever came in contact [with] in the USIA. He was an advisor and very helpful. Went on many trips throughout the country with me.

He's in the Dominican Republic. He's still a good friend of mine, by the way. He was in Peru; when he was in Peru someone burned the American flag. He went out and took this fellow by the shoulders and gave him a good cuffing and so forth. Big, tall Texas, Ernesto Uribe, and his wife Sarah are good friends.

Let me see who else I had. So we would meet regularly. When I say regularly, I'm talking about weekly also — I'd call a meeting whenever I had a problem. Assess it, evaluate it, and do it. Oh yes, the MilGroup was represented, Colonel Basset. If he didn't make it he would send an alternative. Rex Miller was his — one of his major officers. I don't know

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where he is now, but I was in touch with him when he was in Kansas. He attended a War College in Leavenworth, Kansas.

Q: I can't think— anyway, it's Army's...

BECKER: Yes, well anyway, in the travels — I should have told you about one thing. when I arrived there was a serious problem. Three officers and landowners were accused of killing two foreign priests, ten peasants and two students. It was before my arrival. It created quite a scandal. At that time, I was in a good relationship with General Melgar. He wanted the accused tried. They were convicted but given a small sentence. It was known as the Horcones Massacre.

On the North Coast there's the Bay Islands. The Bay Islands are just — I've traveled the Caribbean — there isn't anything like these Bay Islands. There are three islands, founded by the English years ago. the religion is Methodists; also the Bible Society has an organization there, and the multi-million dollar shrimp boat operation. It's run by a family named Hyde. I visited the Bay Islands and I brought the importance of the Bay Islands to President Melgar. I told him it was very important to develop the Bay Islands; not only because of tourism but also because the lack of roads — they don't have anything and need help. Bridwell was my adviser, by the way.

So it was the first time he ever went to the Bay Islands. We went as a delegation, and we went to three islands by plane. As a result of that, they were going to do something on tourism by there still doing something about it. It's lack of money in promoting the Bay Islands. But I had a serious problem; Hydes contacted Bridwell, who called me, came over to see me. He said one of Hydes' boats has been picked up in New Orleans, Louisiana with marijuana. And he has another boat that he is suspicious of. The shrimp boats may have brought in some boxes and in the boxes may be some “coke” headed for Miami. He doesn't want to get arrested. What happened is, that I immediately got on the telephone directly to the Attorney General's office. I think I told State what I was doing, but it was that

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kind of emergency where the boat was landing and I didn't want it to get picked up by the inspectors. My relations with the Justice Department were so good that I could do that. So I did. Stahlman was supposed to be the narcotics officer, too. But he never gave a report on anything on narcotics that was going on — or any commercial or trade activities.

Q: This is your economic officer?

BECKER: Yes. Never gave a report. My efforts resulted—in the investigation that was made very quickly by Melgar who found that several of his officers were involved in narcotics shipment. I did save Hyde. The shipment in Miami did have coke. Now, what happened is, after my tour of duty, I learned that Stahlman took credit about this narcotic episode which only Bridwell, Hyde, myself and the Justice Department and probably State knew about. I didn't care about that. But I am giving you one example which is an exception. He did not — where they needed help in Honduras with commercial agricultural, other activities help or report on any activity when any one sought information I would be contacted. I don't know what he did, nor trust him, therefore I did not include him in the super-duper group.

Now, I had no knowledge about him before I arrived. I learned about him after I arrived, or from his colleagues and my staff.

Q: Well, it sounds as though you had a staffing problem. If you had a DCM who had a problem, an economic officer who was not very supportive, and a secretary who had been a problem elsewhere, you did not get the support you were entitled.

BECKER: That's based upon — still, that's even based upon my own experience in my profession. If you don't have a good secretary, it's just unfortunate. I don't have to lay emphasis on that. You asked me the question. The emphasis is on what did I do? I went into the field, I was not in the office all the time. For example, the Cobana Honduran Banana Industry Company in the field who exported 1/4 of the exports, had a problem — the attorneys for United Fruit — came in to see me and it was part of the agrarian reform

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where they wanted to take certain land, and take certain cattle, and so forth. Sure, I could go out and fight the agrarian rule like...

Q: *Sanchez?*

BECKER: No, that was not my business to get involved in the internal affairs of one's country. But it involved a United States corporation. I met with Cesar Batres Melgar's advisor and ultimately happily resolved the problem. Once, I went to a very large meeting when the officials of the Honduran government gave out deeds to the Campesinos. It was important to be there, and say some words. I spoke at all these different occasions including all the military units. I recall inaugurating a low a middle income housing project in San Pedro Sula. A \$4 million AID project. Another AID project was ParaMedicaid and Nursing Program. I presented them with two checks one for \$35,000 as part of a \$3 million program and another for \$3,000. they have a state police set-up called FUSEP, that's very powerful, very good. They were like the military.

Before I left, I attended the cartographers' association meeting, for Central America — they held a Tegucigalpa — I spoke to them and participated in the meetings. This is typical of other meetings or conferences. USIA sent down Charlie Byrd, the guitarist, and I entertained him. He was wonderful. We had a couple other similar events. We had official visitors. The Ambassador from Guatemala, Bestir, who entertained me when I first landed in Guatemala City En route to Honduras and others before my departure.

Don Bridwell came to me and said. "Look, we have a major project here. The Patronadas are working on it in the Chiluteca area. Can you do this? You have to do it in a hurry."

What happened was when the water receded the river — I'm trying to think of the name of the river — they were able to cross and buy their goods, or traffic to the other side. And when the river would rise it would cut off 12-14 villages in the Agua Calientes. So there was no transportation or communication. They couldn't go to market or trade. I said, "Sure, we'll go on ahead and do it." I didn't ask for orders, or writings, or anything else. Just went

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ahead and I talked to AID, and I said, "Look, we just need a few dollars for this bridge. We did it orally, Don did it. We did that bridge in a hurry. I went to the inauguration ceremony, and out of the clear blue sky they named it, Punta del Becker.

Q: Oh, how wonderful.

BECKER: that gives you some idea of the relationship that developed. Within our own embassy; 2, with respect to projects to help Honduras; 3, the friendship between the United States and friendship both in the press — particularly — military, and other areas. I laid a very good base of relationship. Ann was a party to my activities. But then Melgar was deposed by Policarpo Paz Garcia. He was the Chief of the Armed Forces. During my tenure, I thought Melgar was a good, fair honest man — but that is the game of politics.

Q: Was he deposed during the time you were there?

BECKER: No, afterwards. The following year by the Consejo. I have been told basically within the military. One —when he ordered court-martial against the military officers on Narcotics. Second, the lingering image of the Horcones Massacre. Also an exception to the peaceful Honduras and there were political reasons that led to the coup.

Q: This was the drug smuggling? Well, you left Honduras in — after the election of...

BECKER: Oh yes, I was in the office for quite a while.

Q: I was talking about the election of Carter...

BECKER: Election night I was on the air with Jacob Goldstein on the history of the two-party system and the election process. You know, because that was my basic background in American political history. I told you about my contributions to the Smithsonian and the LBJ Library. Not just those, but I gave collections to Dartmouth College, Strom Institute, and Saint Albans School. And I'm writing a book on it now. I did articles on it. Basically, with knowledge of American politics, they had an expose of our two party system and how

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it works, notwithstanding the fact that Carter was elected and Ford was defeated. It was a non-partisan approach.

You hand in your resignation after election, as you know and I handed in my resignation to the President. But I hadn't heard from the President Carter, for many months. But we kept going, every day of the week, notwithstanding — not waiting for doomsday — and not waiting to leave until we're told what we were going to do. So, I kept working, as the record shows, in all these different areas. You only got what was just the tip of the iceberg in your interrogation.

Q: No, I understand that. This is a very rough sketch.

BECKER: In this short time, I gave you the records, and there are five or six volumes of which I have here, to document what I've said to you.

Q: Well, this has been an excellent documentation of what a busy ambassador does. I think the term is, "you hit the ground running," when you arrived there. I do want to thank you for this interview. I really appreciate being able to have talked with you on this.

BECKER: Well, I want to close by saying that this oral history of the various ambassadors — they're all going to be different. I think that this honor as the US Ambassador that was given to me involved twenty years of Presidential service. It capped my career, and it was an experience that my wife and I will never forget. Particularly the friends we have made. There's one Honduras officer — I was able to get a grant of a scholarship Hector Renee Fonseca. I brought him here to American University. He received his bachelors and masters degrees in Business Administration. He is now a military leader, and right hand man to the general, the Chief of The Armed Forces.

I feel that, and my wife does too, it's kind of topped our career of public service. The highest honor anyone can receive from the President of the United States is to be an ambassador, to represent the United States in a foreign country. And I know that, from my

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point of view, we had three weeks of goodbyes from the diplomatic corp, the military staff, friends, and the government officials before we left — an everlasting memory.

Q: Wonderful.

BECKER: By the way, you know in Honduras, Stew the Chief of mission — foreign mission — is always a priest. At least in Honduras. I think that's true probably in Central American and South American countries. He's the Dean of the Diplomatic Corp.

Q: Yes, the nuncio.

BECKER: And they never have given an ambassador an honor or a gift who served such a short term. They made an exception and did honor me with a gift at a reception.

Q: We're running out of time. Thank you.

End of interview